

Extra Feature Story

The Berlin Wall 20 Years After the Fall

November 6, 2009

November 9, 2009 marks the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, an event that precipitated the collapse of the communist-run Soviet Union and signaled the end of a division that had separated Europe for decades.

The Berlin Wall was the concrete barrier between West Germany -- governed by democratic Western powers -- and communist-ruled East Germany. It also separated the city of Berlin into two parts, split families and created hardships on both sides.

To mark the occasion, current German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on a trip to the United States, thanked Americans for helping Germany reunite after the wall fell.

"Today's generation needs to prove that it is able to meet the challenges of the 21st century," Merkel said, "and that, in a sense, we are able to tear down walls of today."

Leaders and officials from around the world will gather in Berlin for official anniversary celebrations.

World War II victors divide Germany

At the end of World War II, Germany was divided into four zones to be owned by the Allied Powers: the Soviet Union, United States, Great Britain and France.

The four nations intended to reunify the city eventually, but as their relationship with the communist Soviet Union deteriorated, the three democratic countries combined their zones to form West Germany and the Soviet Union created East Germany in 1949.

Although the city of Berlin sat completely inside the Soviet zone, the city itself was similarly divided into a Western democratic side and a communist Eastern side.

Within the first few years of separation, the two sides of Berlin became dramatically different: West Berlin experienced a period of economic growth, while East Berlin fell into a period of economic and social decline.

East Germany erects a barrier

Many East Berliners, eager to escape their declining side of the city, crossed the border into West Berlin and fled to West Germany. By 1961, as many as 2.5 million people had left East Germany.

The Communist Party that controlled East Germany decided that enough was enough and unexpectedly closed the border. In a few days, East Berlin erected a concrete wall more than 100 miles long, separating families and friends for decades to come.

"The East Germans with little cranes were moving huge cement flower pots and positioning them across the roadways that go under the Brandenburg Gate. And so it looked like a joke at first -- they're sealing it off with flowers," recalled former NewsHour co-anchor Robert MacNeil, who was a junior correspondent for NBC covering the events in Germany at the time. But when he looked to the right and left he said he could see the East Germans erecting barbed wire fences before filling in the barrier with cinder blocks.

"These were actually the first moments of the beginning of the Berlin Wall. ... The tension had been building for months," MacNeil said.

The wall became symbolic of what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called the "Iron Curtain," a metaphorical divide between democratic and communist nations that characterized the Cold War of the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

The fall of the wall and the Iron Curtain

On November 9, 1989, as communism began to decline in many countries in Eastern Europe, East Germany announced that people could begin to enter West Germany through specific checkpoints.

Crowds of Berliners from both sides of the city began to storm the wall and during weeks of euphoric celebration, the wall was destroyed.

East and West Germany reunited in October of 1990.

"It was one of those moments when you know this is a turning point in history, just as the beginning of the building of the wall in 1961 was a turning point," MacNeil said.

Watch a 1989 NewsHour roundtable conversation about what the fall of the wall meant to Europe and the U.S. [here](#).

-- Compiled by Kate Stanton for NewsHour Extra

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